

# FFXIII REMINISCENCE ~Tracer of Memories: Chapter 9 - Breathless

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Translation credits to Galvea@GameFAQs.

Whenever the wind dies down, an unpleasant smell assaults my nostrils. It's the smell of something burning...

The smell of cooking or a bonfire would be nice, relaxing, but this smell in the air only sickens me. It's the smell you get when things you should and shouldn't burn are made to burn together, all the same, and it comes as an attack to the very back of my nose. And there's the smell of dust and sweat in the mix too.

I try to see what's burning, but I don't find any likely fires around me. I think the smell must have been carried here by the winds, from far away, but just as I'm thinking that it dawns on me. What an idiot I am. The smell is coming from me. The smell of smoke has seeped into my hair and clothes. It must have gotten all over me when I passed the barricade on the corner of the street, just a moment ago. The militia holed up in the barricade had been burning scraps of old tire and assorted trash in steel drums. A makeshift smoke-screen.

Just a few months ago, this was a sleepy, out-of-the-way town. Now it's a complete battlefield. Gunshots, explosions, howls of outrage and screams echo through these old brick streets. And those aren't exclusive to this town, either. All the neighbouring provinces, too, have turned into a battleground for violence.

This country currently lies divided by a civil war. It started with a relatively peaceful demonstration, but there was a violent crackdown, blood was shed, and that angered the people, turned them into a rioting mob. The government tried to subdue the people with force, but a part of the military sided with the citizens, turned on the government instead. Eventually the banners of revolution were flown, there was a coup d'état, and the reins of power changed hands; and this time, the new authority began to crack down on their predecessors. Ethnic feuds from long ago, old hatchets that should have been buried, were dug up, sparks of conflict flew everywhere, people died in accidental skirmishes which then became an all out war, armed forces were deployed from other countries on the sly, adding fuel to fire – it was a domino effect arranged by the devil himself, and things got progressively worse until finally, everyone's stuck in this quicksand, a civil war going nowhere. There are so many forces in play here you'd be hard put to tell friend from foe. Nobody knows where the next bullet is going to come from.

This is the sort of battlefield I'm reporting from. And I chose to come here of my own free will.

I'm staring straight in the face of reality, of the truth behind "this world".

It's been half a year since the end of my journey.

I wasn't able to meet Lightning in the end, but I found out the whole story about "that other world" from Hope Estheim; he told me everything in his second interview.

The story of Lightning's return, her 13 days before the end of the world – the liberation of souls, the battle with God, and our rebirth in a new world. Lightning and her friends fought for us when "that other world" ended, and thanks to them we were reborn into "this world".

This should have been a new world filled with hope.

But what's really going on here in "this world"?

I don't know anymore. I've seen too many terrible things on the battlefields.

Lightning and her friends defeated Bhunivelze, the God of Light. They ended the age of God's reign over mankind, and gifted us with a new world where we can be free. They did all that for us, but look at us now. In a world without God, humans have taken to killing each other. What did they fight for? What was the point? Or is this depressing world exactly what we deserve? Humans are foolish and driven by greed, and this world, this mess of hatred and strife – is this the world tailor-made for humanity?

I hear hurried, flopping footsteps coming towards me. The undignified slapping of loose shoes is inevitable; the military boots are a bad fit for their owner. I hear him complain under his breath, from time to time, about how scarce supplies are, how it's next to impossible to get shoes that fit.

The young man running towards me with a gun on his shoulder is a member of the militia, here to ensure my safety while I do my reporting. He told me he's received no training from the military, that up until a little while ago, he was only a student. Not even students are spared, they have to take up weapons and fight. This is the reality of this civil war.

"This is bad! We're in danger here!"

The young man's features are contorted by anxiety. I understand what he means a heartbeat later. A missile lands on the building right across from us.

The deafening roar is followed by a violent eruption of smoke, and small pieces of debris rain upon us. The young man is used to this, and he leaps nimbly for cover, but all I can do is stand around, stupidly. We were lucky. If the missile had landed just a little nearer we would have been blown away by the shock wave, or maybe even find ourselves crushed by large chunks of rubble.

My luck runs out the next moment.

The impact from the blast batters me all over. The second missile explodes nearby, and my consciousness takes flight.

### **-Chapter 9: Breathless-**

I come to myself, and stop.

I don't know how, but I've been on my feet, walking. And I'm not alone. I'm part of a group of a few dozen men, all trudging in the same direction, headed somewhere.

I know I was blown away by a missile and I blacked out after that, but I can't for the life of me recall why I'm walking with these people. Did I wake up and get away, completely delirious, and somehow joined this procession? Maybe, in my desperation, I lost my memories – I don't know. It must be the shock from the blast, but I feel light and dizzy. The ringing in my ears is so loud I'd be lucky to be able to hear anything.

I stand unmoving, and the group goes on ahead, leaving me behind. A few of them look like soldiers, but citizens make up the overwhelming majority. They must be a band of refugees. I try to look for the young man who was my guide, but I don't see him.

Everyone looks completely exhausted. They walk unsteadily, shoulders slumped.

"Are you alright? Where are you headed?"

I try talking to them, but no one replies. I get nothing from them, not even a sigh. Or maybe someone said something, only I wasn't able to hear them, not with the ringing in my ears.

I give up and decide to follow them. We are surrounded by a pale darkness, and it looks like night is almost upon us. I know I blacked out just a little after noon, so I must have been out of it for hours. And it isn't just the passing of time I've failed to notice; somehow or other, I've covered some distance. I'd been in the middle of investigative reporting around town, but there isn't a single building to be seen, not out here among the desolate wilderness. I look up and there's only a dark, cloudy sky. I don't think the sun has set, not yet, but it's nowhere to be seen. Deep, dark shadows puddle about my feet, and I can't see why.

Something strange is going on here.

Eventually the road turns into a long, uphill battle. The upwards climb knocks the wind out of me, but no one else has to stop to catch their breath. The sound of my ragged breathing mingle with the footsteps of these silent walkers.

I make it past the slope, and find myself at the top of a small hill.

A gasp escapes me.

A dark ocean lies before me. Or maybe it's a lake, or a massive river. Beyond the dark waters that flow like darkness itself, shadows hang like a shroud, and I can see neither horizon nor the opposite shore. But one thing's for sure. Lake or river, it shouldn't be here. My work as a reporter brought me to a landlocked region. No big lakes, no rivers, nothing.

What ocean is this?

I am at a complete loss, but no one pays me any attention; the procession files past me, down the hill and towards the shore. Those leading the way have already reached the surf, and are wading into the dark waters. What are they trying to do?

This is when I notice one man in particular, standing on the shore, watching our progress. He carries his muscular strength like a fortress, and the aura of the unforgiving exudes from him. His violet hair sways gently in the wind, a wind lacking the salty scent of the sea.

I stand, rooted to the spot, and stare at him. My presence does not go unnoticed by him, either, and our eyes meet. I don't believe I've ever met him, but –

"You should know who I am."

His voice comes to me as though it were the rumblings of the ground beneath my feet, from somewhere deep below.

"You met "them" and discovered the truth behind "that other world"."

His words stir my memory, and I think I know what he's talking about. By "them", he must mean Hope Estheim and his friends.

"How'd you know I met them –"

"Your heart is all too transparent to me. They must have told you. I am that despicable enemy who manipulated the Chaos and called forth destruction – my name is already seared unto your memory."

He turns towards me, his right hand outstretched, and gathers the empty air into a fist. It may have been sorcery of some kind; I feel a tightness in my chest, as though my heart were caught in the grip of an invisible hand. My heart begins to pound, wildly, and I have to struggle to breathe. And a single name floats to the forefront of my consciousness, unwillingly dragged out from the depths of my mind.

"Caius Ballad –!"

The man who wished for the end of the world, the man who caused the distortion of time, the man who unleashed the destructive force known as the Chaos.

At the end of the fight that lasted 13 days, "that other world" was destroyed, and the souls of men were reborn into "this world", with Lightning and the others to show the way.

But Caius rejected rebirth. He remained in the realm between life and death, and became a shepherd for the souls of the dead.

– The souls of the dead.

Realization hits me like a ton of bricks, and I turn to look at the procession of people I had been a part of. They are headed for the sea, and show no signs of slowing even when up to their ankles in the water, where the waves break again and again on the shore. They march steadily into the depths, without hesitation, and one by one they disappear under the waves, sinking into the dark beyond. A smooth and silent procession. Wordlessly, they are swallowed whole by the waters, leaving nothing in their wake, not even a single bubble. How could I not have seen it? Not a single one of them had to catch their breath, no one sighed, not once, on the long journey here.

These people have already taken their last breaths – so what does that mean for me? Am I not part of the procession too?

I refuse to admit it, but realization creeps into my consciousness all the same. The shock of it is too much for me to bear, and my knees begin to tremble. Unable to stand any longer, I drop to my knees.

I'm dead. The missile got me.

Uncertainty and confusion break over the surface of my mind like waves, leaving my mind a complete blank. I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead –

Before I know it, everyone's gone. The dead have all been swallowed by the sea of darkness, and I'm the only one left, on my knees before the God of Death.

"The dead have all disappeared into the darkness. It is almost time for you to go."

I am crushed by the weight of Caius's solemn words. Go sink in the black sea, is that what he's telling me? What becomes of me after that? Will I wander the bottom of the dark waters, as one of the dead? Will that be the end of me?

I hate this. This isn't how I want my life to end.

"...Wait."

There's nothing left for me but death. If this is the end of the line, there are things I want to know before my life fades away.

"Why am I here? Why was I reborn into "this world"? What was the point?"

Caius doesn't reply; doesn't react, even. Well, I don't care. I continue to vent.

"The Saviour defeated God in the final 13 days, and we obtained a new world. All of us who lived in "that other world", our souls were led here to "this world". This should have been a new world filled with hope."

"Are you saying it isn't?"

"I saw the true face of this world, out on the battlefields. We hate each other, kill each other."

"You have merely described a human being. Conflict lies at the core of mankind. Once the Gods who used to hold the reins of mankind disappeared, it was only natural for men to fight one another for control."

"If what you say is true, a world under God would be more peaceful. Was it all a mistake, men defeating God?"

No. No, no. What am I saying? I met Hope and the others, I know they saved mankind, I know this. I should be grateful to them, for bringing our souls here to "this world". So why –

"Are you saying you renounce all they have done? That they should not have destroyed Bhunivelze, the God of Light?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I just, I just don't understand. Their intentions were noble and good. But this world is ugly and sad. I can't wrap my head around this."

"You are as human as they ever come."

There is a note of disdain in his voice, a hint of derision.

"So you despaired over the world you were given, and turned your back on it. If it offends you so to live in this world, I suggest you throw yourself into the sea of death."

I sit on the ground, unmoving, as he gestures towards the black sea, where the dead are swallowed whole.

"The souls of men that have dissolved into the Chaos are one day reborn, granted a new lease on life. If you wish it, however, you are also permitted everlasting rest. Do you choose to sleep in the womb of darkness, never to awaken? Your eyes, shut forever, will never have to look upon this hideous world again."

"You're telling me that if I choose to sleep, you, the God of Death, will grant my wish...?"

"No, you grant your own wishes. If it is sleep you wish for, you may sleep until the end of time; that is all. You know the truth, but you do not see the true essence of things. God does not exist in this world. This is not a world in which men are puppets, manipulated by God. Men, and only men, determine the state of this world. The world is built solely upon the will of men."

"The will of men..."

"Yes. The world you have rejected is hardly the result of the plans of a wicked God, but the will of men. And you yourself are one of the men who created this world."

The words of the God of Death ring in my ears like thunder, and I feel like I've been dealt a blow to the gut. Memories rise from the ashes in the back of my mind, memories of the smiles of those who had fought in "that other world", to the very end.

Why did I forget? How could I not have seen it? – I've met them. I should have understood.

My mind is made.

I get up and take a step forward.  
Let's go. Time to go into the dark sea.

"I see you have decided to take your leave of this ugly world, forever."

"You're mistaken."

I look at the sea for a long moment.

"I'm going in there so I can return. I get to decide where I'm headed, that's what you said. I may be dead now, but if I wish to live again, I can be reborn as a different person."

"And once again, the state of the world will send you into despair."

"If the world is ugly, I will change it."

This is what they taught me.

Taken individually, we may be insignificant, but together we have what it takes to change the world.

What I have may be small and frail, but I am far from powerless. I can change the world, little by little, in my own way. I believed that, and that was why I made for the battlefields. I wanted to show the whole world the truth, draw attention to the merciless reality we were living in. I wanted to increase the number of voices shouting for an end to war. I wanted to help steer the world into a better future.

But I was defeated by the cruel and terrible things I saw on the battlefield. I was crushed under the weight of reality, sent to my knees, and I gave up on the future, lost faith in the world.

"Thank you. I'm glad I was able to talk to you in the end. Thanks to you, I know where I went wrong."

I recover myself.

I no longer have anything to fear. No doubts, either. When I'm born again, next, I won't lose faith. I'll keep my eyes on the future, make my way towards it one step at a time, never abandoning my hopes of changing the world. I promise myself this as I reach the surf and begin to wade into the dark waters.

"Do you truly wish for death?"

A thin wisp of a voice murmurs in my ear. Not a single voice, but many.

"Your life hasn't faded yet."

It is the ghostly voice of a young girl. I am surrounded by layers and layers of this voice, floating to me from both near and far away.

"You can go anywhere you like."

"It is your will that shows you the way."

I know these voices – these young women.

And this is what Caius Ballad, Guardian of these young women, then said to me:

"Live, or die – it is your choice to make."

"Wait, I'm already dead, aren't..."

"The dead disappear in silence. No dead person is as long-winded as you are."

"In that case, I'm still..."

"Which path will you follow? The decision is yours."

I wished to live.

The God of Death smiled, and it was a gentle smile.

The voices of the many Yeuls whisper in my ear.

"Tell myself... to be happy with Noel."

I feel my heart beating again. My body is light, and the ground falls away from my feet. The dark sky pulls me in, and I feel myself ascending in the darkness.

Somebody is guiding me. I can't see who it is, but I feel the presence of a soft and fluffy whiteness. Whatever it is, it's carrying a rose-coloured light, like a lantern showing me the way, a signpost in the dark.

I fly on, and it feels like I'm being led by the hand by this warm presence. Eventually, a tiny pinprick of light appears before me. Like a summer's dawn, the light and heat begin to grow and intensify, even as I watch – Oh. That must be the light of day.

It's so bright now I can't keep my eyes open. The white presence that brought me here begins to go away, into the distance. I'm scared and lonely, but a childlike voice speaks reassuringly to me.

"It's alright. You can go home now, kupo."

I open my eyes.

~The End~

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